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Where the great Peace River flows.  
Our Fort Vermilion Mission. Issued  
by the Board of Home Missions and  
Social Service of the Presbyterian  
Church of Canada. January, 1925.

# PEACE RIVER FLOWS

*Our Fort Vermilion Mission*



Rev. T. F. McGregor and Dr. P. M. Macdonnell.  
En route to Fort Vermilion, 300 miles down the great Peace River

*From notes by*

REV. T. F. MCGREGOR, M.A.

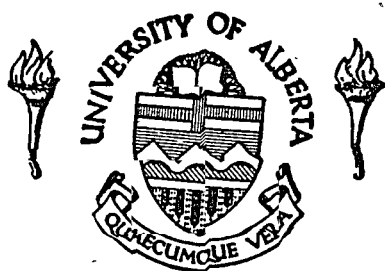
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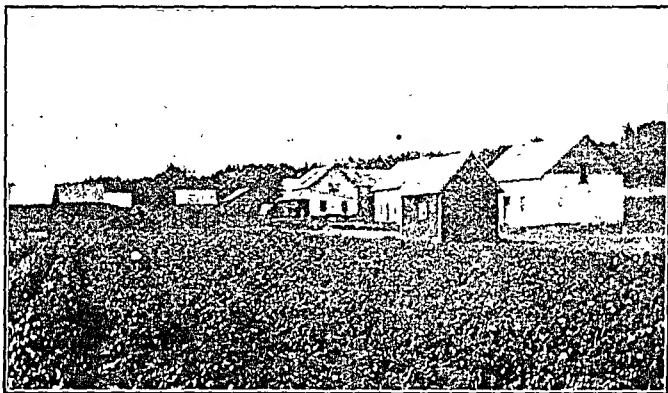
## WHERE THE GREAT PEACE RIVER FLOWS

Our farthest north mission field is known as the Fort Vermilion field. The Hudson's Bay fort so called is about 600 miles from Edmonton, 300 miles northwest by rail to the town of Peace River, and then by boat 300 miles down the stream but still within the northern boundary of the Province of Alberta.

Roman Catholic missionaries have long been active among the Indians and half-breeds of the district, and the Church of England began a mission there about 50 years ago. But it was not until 1921 that any other Christian Church entered the field. By that time the Board of Home Missions and Social Service of the Presbyterian Church in Canada had adopted a plan by which special provision is made for the supply of sparsely settled fields of wide extent. In May of that year, accordingly, the Rev. T. F. McGregor, M.A.—tall, straight, rugged, devoted—was given charge of the territory in the valley of the Peace River, from Peace River town to the Red River post 350 miles north, with his headquarters at Fort Vermilion.

At the same time Dr. P. M. Macdonnell, of Kingston, Ont., was sent by the Alberta Government into the same territory to attend to the physical well-being of the inhabitants. The minister and the doctor are not always chums, but these men, meeting at Peace River town, soon showed themselves a well-

assorted pair. They constructed a boat for themselves, stowed their goods in it and proceeded to row or drift day after day on the broad bosom of the mighty river between the islands and the main shore. Sometimes they were hindered in the daytime by head-winds, and at night when they camped on the shore, they were always annoyed by the mosquitoes, but on the whole they found the trip



Home of Mr. Sheridan Lawrence.

not unpleasant. As they went, they could see above the high banks nothing but light poplar trees mingled with a few spruce. But they learned that beyond their horizon there were hay meadows and open prairies. A small percentage of the country consists of muskeg and pine ridges, but for the most part the soil is a deep rich loam on a clay subsoil. Small lakes and streams are abundant.

At the end of four days our travellers arrived at Carcajou Point, 200 miles from their starting-point. Here, while the doctor treated the sick, the minister visited the families, held services and baptized seven

children, three of whom were members of a Presbyterian family which had located there six years before and had never until then been visited by a minister of their own church. Two more days' rowing brought the two men to Fort Vermilion and to the home of Mr. Sheridan Lawrence, a few miles from the Fort. Everywhere along their route and at its end they were joyfully received.



Fruit and Vegetables grown 600 miles north of Edmonton.

Fur-bearing animals are numerous in that region and Fort Vermilion had long been a centre of the fur trade, but by this time it had become a small town with saw-mill, grist-mill and general stores. It is beautifully situated where the high steep banks of the river give way to a gentle slope from the water's edge. Of the country round about the most prominent feature is its park-like appearance. It produces the finest of hard wheat, no complete failure of the crop having been recorded in more than 30 years. Barley sown after the middle of May will ripen in the long hours of sunlight by the last week of July.

Indian corn nearly always matures in the open. Tomatoes, cabbages, pumpkins, etc., bring forth abundantly. There are thousands of homesteads available on Dominion lands. Protestant families are needed to settle on these in communities making possible the establishment of schools and churches.

During the summer of their first year the doctor and the minister led the community in a successful effort to begin a cottage hospital. The funds for the building were provided by the people and they helped in its erection. Our Women's Missionary Society contributed the equipment and sent two nurses to take charge. The general health is excellent and the patients have not been many, but the presence of the hospital is a source of satisfaction to everybody.

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The Church of England was wont to hold its services in two churches, one at the Fort and the other seven or eight miles away at Stoney Point where the Dominion Government carries on one of its series of Experimental Farms. A residence had also been built in the town for the missionary. But the work has now been abandoned save for an occasional visit from the bishop of the diocese. In the early summer of 1923 he cordially invited Mr. McGregor to make use of both the churches and the mission house. To these signal proofs of his confidence he added the offer of the use of a span of ponies and a cutter, which Mr. McGregor gratefully accepted. He himself has started a station on the "Ranche" of Mr. Lawrence. At these three points services are now held with considerable regularity, and at several other points, as the opportunity arises.

A leaf out of Mr. McGregor's diary will probably make the course of his week clearer:

"On *Monday*, Feb. 4th, 1924, I drove about 25 miles via Lawrence's to George Ward's place. That night I used my stereopticon and showed lantern views on a wide range of subjects to this family which is located in a lonely spot out of reach of school and church. On *Tuesday* I drove about 25 miles across prairies and through two extensive pieces of bush on to Buffalo Head Prairie. Here I visited all the Protestant and some of the Roman Catholic families. That evening I held a religious service and again used the lantern. Nearly all the people of the settlement were present. On *Wednesday* I returned about 40 miles to Fort Vermilion, visiting at six of the settlers' houses on the way. On *Thursday* I did some reading and in the evening drove to Stoney Point to attend choir practice and hold a short service, returning the same night and covering about 15 miles. On *Friday* I prepared a sermon for the next Sunday and in the evening conducted the Young People's meeting which is held at the mission house each week. On *Saturday* I drove to Sheridan Lawrence's and in the evening showed my pictures to the family and others who were present. On *Sunday* I conducted services at 11 a.m. at Lawrence's with an attendance of 18, and at 2 p.m. at Stoney Point with an attendance of 43, chiefly children and young people. At Fort Vermilion at 7.30 p.m. the attendance was 15. The night was raw with snow in the air. I was grateful to see so many out."

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Though Mr. McGregor's responsibility has thus been increased, he does not even now confine himself to the country about his headquarters. He remembers still that his field includes the whole valley of the river with all its settlements as far south as

Peace River town. Several times he has made the trip to that town. Usually he goes by one of the regular boats but in the fall of 1923 he and a friend travelled by a power canoe. The friend shot a moose in the early part of the trip, and the settlers furnished ripe tomatoes, green cucumbers and other vegetables. Unfortunately the motor broke down before



Congregation at Buffalo Head Prairie.

the end of the trip and it became necessary for one man to take the track-line and walk along the shore, while the other sat in the boat to steer. They changed places every hour as the towing was laborious especially on rocky or muddy shores.

In the summer of the same year he attended a meeting of his Presbytery at Grande Prairie, 450 miles from his home, and it is pleasant to relate that he was then made Moderator by his brethren.

For the return journey he is accustomed to build a boat for himself at Peace River and start on an



itinerary. At every landing along the river he moors his boat and starts, generally on foot, for the settlements of the interior. At night he sleeps at the side of the trail, and by day he visits the settlers and conducts services where a few families or bachelors can be gathered. Once when on the trail he was awakened in the very early morning by a pulling at his blankets. When he got his eyes open, he was surprised to see that his would-be bedfellow was a full-grown bear. He took a stick and drove the bear off, replenished his fire and lay down to finish his sleep.

On another occasion he met at Peace River a newly married couple who were about to make their way into his own territory. He aided the groom to build his scow and load their effects, and saw them off on a honeymoon trip down the river to Carcajou (200 miles) and across country 40 miles to their home on Keg River Prairie. Before he finished his own trip, he visited this same prairie, riding, this time on an Indian pony, a total distance of 100 miles.

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One could not in this pamphlet narrate even a few of the unusual experiences Mr. McGregor has met, but room must be made for the story of

#### THE FUNERAL OF GUS GUNDERSEN

"On Monday, Mar. 27th, 1922, Dr. Macdonnell, as Coroner of the Fort Vermilion district, started with a party down the river to investigate the case of Gus Gundersen, a trapper who had been frozen to death 60 miles from the Fort. The minister went with the party behind his own team in order to hold a funeral service and bring the body to Fort Vermilion for burial.

A pistol was fired at 7.30 a.m. and the two teams started east. Good time was made for 12 miles, at

which point the trail runs out on the river. There we fed the teams and 'boiled the kettle', which includes frying bacon, and warming up tinned stuff and bannock, and generally insulting our digestions.

At this point the river is above a mile wide so that the wind has every chance. Moreover, the high banks produce the effect of a tube. Our trip was made under ideal weather conditions, and yet the next morning one got a faint idea what freighting on the river would be like in really bitter weather.

That night the stopping-place was the cabin of a trapper, famous up and down the route not only for his marvellous yarns but also for his all-inclusive generosity. His cabin is about ten feet by twelve, so that, what with a big bunk and the stove, half a dozen people could find standing-room only. We had to put most of the furniture outside.

The following morning we made an early start, reached the end of the river section of our journey by noon, and in the afternoon pushed on nine miles inland to Adam's ranch. Near by is the hut in which lay the body of the dead man. The neighbors gathered at Mr. Adam's house and the minister conducted a service, the doctor with his excellent voice singing, "One Sweetly Solemn Thought". The service was much to the point as some of those present had been drifting into lawless ways and agnostic thinking.

The inquest which was held immediately after made the circumstances of the tragedy clearer. Gundersen had set out to visit his traps, but lost his trail in a few hours. The fires which he had kindled, as they became gradually smaller, told of his inability to settle down and get a good blaze going. His legs below the knees were frozen solid, and he tried to thaw them out, burning through the skin over his last fire. Then he crawled some hundred yards on his hands and knees. It must have

been a horrible five days and the last sleep almost welcome.

During the night Mr. McGregor managed to get a presentable coffin made, and within the next few days the body was brought to Fort Vermilion and, after a burial service in St. Luke's Church, lowered to its last resting-place."

Will any visible result of this faithful labor abide? Already a number of the people have been received into full membership on profession of their faith. There is every assurance that the church is being established, and the primary duty of the church to minister to the spiritual needs of men and women wherever they may wander is thus recognized.